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ABSTRACT

An internship program in France, through which a group of French and business students from an American university spent 4 weeks in a medium-sized business, is described. The program's origins, development, and structure are reviewed, and the obstacles to implementation and their resolutions are discussed. Choices made and lessons learned from implementation are examined, and the changes being made for the next summer's program are outlined. Experiences with the program to date are then used as a basis for suggestions on identifying interest abroad (institutions, schools, and business groups), approaching them, and looking for support in the home institution. (MSE)

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ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS INTERNSHIP PROGRAM IN COMMERCIAL FRENCH: A CASE STUDY

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ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS INTERNSHIP PROGRAM IN COMMERCIAL FRENCH: A CASE STUDY.

In the summer of 1985, the French department of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, in cooperation with the School of Business implemented an internship program in France, through which a group of French and Business students spent four weeks in a small or medium-sized business in the South of France. The first year of the program was made possible by a close cooperation between the American institution and Marseille's Regional Chamber of Commerce.

In the present paper I propose to highlight the program's background, present the parties involved, review the 1985 program so as to underscore the difficulties we met at each stage of the program's implementation, and recount how the obstacles were overcome. What choices were made in the program design and what lessons were drawn. I will then discuss the changes which are being put into place for the coming summer. Lastly, in the light of my experience with this program, I will suggest how to identify interests abroad (institutions, school, business groups), how to approach them, and conversely where to look for support in the home institution.

To begin with, let this paper be a tribute to the two remarkable people with whom I have been fortunate to work on this program and without whose tenacity, enthusiasm, resourcefulness the program would never have come into being. This would be my first and strongest remark: only a deep, frank, thorough cooperation between a group of individuals, personally responsible and committed, can make a program work, particularly when this program involves different fields and countries. Therefore, it appears most important for new initiatives in this area to be launched only once these primary sources of individual commitment have been identified.

As for me, this initial step owes a lot to chance. In the summer of 1984 I happened to be at Marseille's Regional Chamber of Commerce (RCC), where I was gathering information and documentation. Chance had it that one of the interviewees had just been back from the U.S. and was curious and puzzled by our teaching business French to american students. We conversed about business programs and I shared with him my feeling that our students would both personally and professionally benefit greatly from an internship period.

Three parties are involved in our business study abroad program. The first one is the Marseille's Regional Chamber of Commerce whose role as the French counterpart is crucial. Our association with this institution gives the program its main asset: a great flexibility and resourcefulness in terms of location and nature of the participating companies. A Regional Chamber of Commerce has the same functions as a departmental Chamber of Commerce; its competence (representation of businesses; studies for economic development) is expanded to several "departments". Thanks to the RCC we have access- in theory at least - to firms working in three sectors -primary, secondary, tertiary-, firms of all sizes, in any part in the Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur region. In terms of research opportunities, we are only beginning to see the richness of the resources which we might be able to tap.

On this side of the Atlantic the program is co-sponsored by the School of Business and the French Department. The program is administered and supported financially by the Business School. I first approached our office in charge of international programs. The nature of our undertaking, however, was more likely to appeal to the business and more particularly to the International business department. I was advised to contact a business professor who, in the past, had already been involved with France and whom I found a genuine and

enthusiastic interest in French culture. He proved to be an excellent intermediary with the rest of the Business School and, needless to say, his expertise in business added strength to our program.

Lastly, the internship program comes in the wake of a personal effort to develop and upgrade our business French program, composed of a sequential two-semester course. After all the lecturing, the readings and in the in-class simulation, it appeared to me that my best contribution would be to enable students to get into a French business, to observe its workings and to acquire a personal and first-hand idea of the state of the French economy and the basic mechanisms of doing business if France.

Moreover, the internship program was creating a significant bridge between a language program and the Business School where one sees a growing interest in foreign languages. Various initiatives- a certificate in International Business with a strong language component, the impending Center of International Business- underscore this new trend.

In view of our French and Business base, four objectives were defined:

1)-to enable the students to acquire an understanding of current practices of selected French firms.

2)-to allow the students to gain competency in French business language, based on a daily exposure to business situations, through the observations and the study of the firm's past and present projects and related activities.

3)-French firms will be made aware of Franco-American business opportunities in the Midwest and of our interest in them as partners in trade.

4)-the students will gain an understanding of international business, thanks to the flow of exchanges between the South of France and the E.E.C., on the one hand, and Africa, on the other.

Our first group of participating companies would be small to medium-sized and would all be dealing with solar energy (research, design, engineering, manufacturing, selling and exporting the different solar products); the targeted students participants would be advanced undergraduates with fluency in French (among the Business French students primarily, but also business students with adequate level of French); the time would be the summer and the span, four weeks.

Let me add that in designing the program to meet these parameters, choices were made, some solutions adopted, others rejected. There exists a lot of alternatives to the format we came to. Each internship can be tailored to meet the needs of each business French program.

Once the goals had been set, my business colleague and myself started meeting on a weekly basis. We kept in close contact with our French counterpart at the RCC in Marseilles in order to work out the logistical details of the stay and to develop each internship as they became available.

Even if one senses approval for such an undertaking, careful public relations steps have to be taken. The success of a program depends heavily upon the degree of support within one's own department. The broader the base, the better the chances for long-term success. It has been pointed out already by colleagues teaching in business French, that a Literature department may show hostility towards what would be perceived as useless, unworthy activities. Fortunately at the University of Wisconsin, this hostility does not exist openly. I nevertheless found it essential to inform those of my colleagues in the department in charge of course development, on a regular and often informal basis. One can thus sense the extend of the consensus, the degree of support and anticipate the objections that may surface in departmental meetings.

In my department, the new initiative was well received and when less so, it was, at the worst,neutral. The growing enrollment in business French helped; the interdisciplinary approach the association with the School of Business was the determining factor. It carried a sense of true innovation and shifted the delicate questions of finances to them. Conversely, the association with a foreign langauge department met the new international business orientation.

The task left ahead was to find the suitable course frame from which would depend essential questions for the Viability of the program such as credits, staffing, and offering, among others. Several options were presented to us and we resorted to a summer directed study course granting credits in French or Business. It is probably the least committal form for the University, at this experimental stage, as well as was, at the time, the easiest to implement. Although course frames vary a great deal from institution to institution, one may want to consider the most elementary one, to start with, when falling short of the initial desire to establish a summer program on the same model as a semester abroad one, with some administrative structure in the country (office, director..). Whenever such a structure is considered, many more elements come into play, such renting space, hiring staff, maintaining contacts, etc...

Two easy alternatives exist to this heavy and costly set up. One would be to look into the already existing facilities your institution might have abroad, and use them when they are not being used (during the summer, for example). The other would be to take advantage of the connections your university/college might have with another U.S. institution to use their administration as well. In our case, our contact person in France spares us a lot of administrative intervention since he is primarily dealing directly with the company and with us, in many ways acting as our proxy to the companies

during the year. Nevertheless, we use our Junior Year Abroad office in Aix as a base during th time we are there. It would no be possible otherwise, for one needs a place to regroup, reflect, consult at regular intervals during the internship program.

The summer directed study format for the program makes it a self-contained unit. Registration takes place before departure, and credit is given when we return.

The main originality is that our students' goals are to study, research and participate in the company's life. Regular internships are work and company oriented. Interns learn a job-related skill or a series of skills. Interns, in our directed study abroad program primarily observe and conduct a study on the various components of the business they are in. The study encompasses the history, structure, workings (interaction, decision making process) of the company, along with an investigation of the company's economic environment, and an assessment of the company's market, competitors, distribution network and customers.

In the first stage, our interns are not performing a task for the company. The host company is under friendly scrutiny and lends itself to it by providing the students with all the necessary elements to complete their study, such as a copy of the company by-laws. Besides reading the materials, students spend most of their time interviewing key company employees who provide them with additional information and often essential insight in the company life and history.

At a second stage, the interns perform a job in the company. The task can range from secretarial responsibilities (telephone, sorting out mail, answering letters) to an original contribution to one aspect of the company activity, in keeping with the student's specialty and the company's need (for instance,

last year a student in accounting and computer science wrote a new program for her host firm).

My business colleague prepares the study guide that the intern will use in the company. The guide is the reference document on which the students base their internship report. This report is a key element in our evaluation of the student's performance, although it is not, the only one.

We thought it essential to identify in each company a person who would serve as a "responsable de stage" (internship supervisor), to facilitate the student's access to materials, provide information and insight, and serve as an intermediary to the other personnel. To find such a person was easy, and in most cases, the company head or his/her assistant volunteered for the part. Thus, although the intern is immersed in a French company, he or she can resort to a group of people from here and from France for advice, suggestions, discussions and guidance in their discovery of a sample of the French business world.

There remained the questions of selection and financing. Although it was late in the year, we had no difficulty finding candidates for the positions. Our contact in France had secured seven internship positions, five of which were in small to medium-size firms dealing with the design, manufacture and sale of solar products, one was at the Chamber of Commerce and the other in an import-export business, all of which in the Marseilles Aix en-provence area. We first asked our students for a resume, in French and in English, based on the French model for a curriculum vitae, highlighting the courses, the job experience directly relevant to the internship along with the motives for the internship and what they wish to do in the company. A copy of all the resumes was sent to our counterpart at the RCC. The overall experience in the summer indicated that the selection process is to give primary consideration to the

level of French and to previous experience of the French culture, such as a prolonged stay in France.we noticed too that the business world is an entity unknown to american students of French, even if they have stayed in the country. The immersion in a foreign firm, although exciting, is psychologically demanding. The adjustment must be fast, and therefore the whole situation can cause anxiety. We noted that the anxiety was inversely proportionate to the level of French and the familiarity with the culture.

I do not imply however that fluency in French is the only issue. Students with very little or no business background will not go very far either, The business knowledge and preparation needed to take the Certificate Pratique will provide enough knowledge to participate in a study and research internship. Students at that level have a good knowledge of basic business terminology, experience in business letter writing, some notions of company law.

Financing is often the cutting edge in our endeavors. The role of my business colleague at that point was essential. Our financial needs were basically of two sorts: money for expenses incurred by the program's director on his on-site company visits and meetings with the students; money for our French counterpart to reimburse his expenses linked with finding internship positions, (travel, phone-calls and part of his time).

Expenses such as we were planning were below the minimum. A real budget for an internship varies a lot according to the nature of the program, whether a faculty presence abroad is needed or not, whether the companies contribute financially or not. Yet, our budget allowed us to fulfill an ideal project to launch a cooperation between French/Business and the Regional Chamber of Commerce. We were able to invite our French contact for a week's visit on campus, which we use to advertise our program widely, and also set up a series of meetings with the interns, to better prepare them for the tasks to come.

Our contact knew every company very well and provided the students with information and documents. Lastly, we had our contact, who has a Doctorate in Economics, give a talk on the French economy and the regions.

Funding remains one of our major concerns. In these times of budgetary constraints, my business colleague and my self strive for the highest possible percentage of self-funding for the program. Last year we made an appeal to Wisconsin companies with subsidiaries abroad and vice versa, French companies in Wisconsin, describing our program and asking for support. It was a sheer disappointment. Thirty-five letters were sent, for which we received polite replies but no money. Consequently, we have had to change tactics and think through our funding strategy. While showing that our program performs an important educational function and promotes a better understanding between countries, we also present ourselves as a source of personal contacts, information and documentation regarding French business matters. moreover, we are working with our person in charge of outside contributions for the University. We hope that our funding efforts will allow us to offer students a modest stipend, when needed, to reduce their financial burden.

A good number of internship programs are based on a exchange of students. The American institution finds internships of the French and vice versa. Ours is not. One may wonder what the companies and the RCC gain in return for the time and energy they devote to our students. In exchange for their cooperation, we have become the unofficial correspondent of the RCC in the Midwest, facilitating contacts with US firms. For example, when our counter_part from France visited us last year we arranged for him to meet with various solar experts, to visit the campus solar lab, and to have an interview with officials from the Wisconsin Department of Energy. This year, we hope to organize, and

partly finance, a business trip for the host firms during which various visits and appointments would be made by us, according to their sources of interest.

Reading our students' reports, interviewing the companies' executives and our contact in Marseille, we can be proud that our first objective, that of gaining competency in the Foreign language for business, has been fully reached. The key to this success was the total immersion of the students and their tasks in their companies. The main difficulties we experienced were related to goals three and four and deal with the exposure to the firm's activity and the possibility of learning about current practices by observing the firm. The students found it hard to learn from a company file and what they learned was too often bits and pieces about company law, accounting, contracts and customers.

It showed us that in spite of all our research, the preparation was not enough. Each student must come in with a basic, precise, well structured and expandable project to be carried out. This year careful attention is paid to the pre-internship period where, besides the general research project, a special project is developed in conjunction with the firm, calling upon the students' strength and interests. For instance, a marketing major will set up, conduct and analyze a marketing survey for a new line of solar products.

Lastly, I would like to recapitulate by giving an outline of the changes put into place for this year. It will be indication of where we are going. The internship period will be longer, five weeks instead of four. A whole week will be devoted to visits and conferences. Several talks are planned; one on the French economy and the rest on business in the South of France. Internships are becoming, more specialized. The student's research meets one the firm's development needs. Lastly, the range of businesses involved is wider: banking, agro-business, and import-export.

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As a conclusion, here are a few points you may want to consider before launching out. First of all, an internship program is not a panacea. The business French courses are our main concern. The internships add an exciting and challenging dimension to the courses. They build up students' confidence and competence. It seems important to reflect upon where and how the program should be intergraded in the business French classes. The better an internship program can be intergrated in the business and culture syllabus, the more easily it will be accepted an supported by the faculty. The internship program should be felt as part of a continuum.

An internship program can take many forms. It can be a few weeks to a few months long; between a four to six weeks internship and a six month one, the difference is considerable, no only in time, but also in organization. In my opinion, at the undergraduate level, a two month internship in a medium-size french company could be beneficial at all levels.

Some internships are paid, others are not. Ours were not last year. You may find easier to have French companies commit themselves to a short period of time which does not cost them anything. However, in the interest of the firms as well as the interest of students, it is better to arrange for some sort of compensation. If the firms contribute financially, they are likely to spend time thinking about what they want the students to do and express their needs, which we can meet by matching those needs with our students skills and desires.

I would caution against sending students to work in French firms for the sake of it. Unless the students are already specialized, the commitment of the firms clear, the contents of the work period well stated, one should not commit one's institution. An internship program must allow our educational goals to be expressed and enable us to structure the program in the best possible way to meet these goals.

What alternatives exist to make contacts with French companies to implement a business internship program abroad? Such a program can be slowly built in the semester program, or Junior Year abroad program. A few study and research internships can be arranged by your representative there and, to complement, an adequate program of courses to be taken at the "Faculté de sciences économiques" or at the school of Business (ESCAE) can be required. THe program will then be gradually built up and at very little cost. A good starting point may be the summer when those faciilities abroad are not being used and may be available for logistical support. Moreover, in most French universities, it is easy to arrange for accommodations in the dorms, for a very reasonable price.

The presence of someone form the home institution seems essential to me, to coordinate and supervise the internships and solve whatever problem may arise. Besides, the director will be able to meet with company executives, thus making the internship program personable and creating a network of business contacts in France. There exists a few institutions in France that would be of help to find internships. The various Business Schools (the ESCAE, "Ecole Supérieure de Commerce et Administration des Entreprises") have long intergrated internships in their training program. In each school, a person or even a small department is in charge of placing students in forms and therefore keep in close contact with many companies. That department may be interested in finding some internships for your institution in exchange of which you would provide the same service for their graduates. You will find a list of the French School of Business in the 1985 July-August issue of "Science et Vie Economie".

The other sources are the Chamber of Commerce. A letter to the President or to the person in charge of public relations and/or in charge of foreign exchanges would be a good starting point.

In conclusion, let me say that the implementation of a business internship program abroad is not an impossible task for your institution, whatever its size. It involves a lot of work and a careful set up. Internships do open a business program on the real world and provide many benefits.

To be able to justify of a work experience in a foreign firm may make a difference for our graduates and future job-seekers. It may be a leading edge for them over other candidates and, while it is possible, we should do our best to offer them that extra asset.

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